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PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #4471/01 3402005
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 062005Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8364
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 004471

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/05/2016
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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL - ASSYRIAN AUTONOMY IN IRAQ - ANOTHER
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Classified By: DEPUTY POLCOUNS ROBERT GILCHRIST FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) and
(d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Minister of Finance Sarkis Aghajan Mamando (Sarkis) told Erbil IPAO November 2, 2006 that he hoped the 'voice of the Assyrian nation' could reach the United States through this meeting. Sarkis, an Assyrian (Iraqi Christian), said Assyrian displacement from central and southern Iraq is due to generalized violence but also serves his goal of an autonomous Assyrian homeland in north-eastern Ninewah province (the Biblical 'Plains of Nineveh'). He expressed concern over potential Turkish incursions against the PKK in areas of Assyrian concentration along the Turkish border with the KRG's northern province of Dohuk (KDP - Kurdish Democratic Party). END SUMMARY.

Persecution and expulsion of Iraqi Christians

12. (SBU) Sarkis Aghajan, KRG Minister of Finance and the only Christian in the KRG cabinet, told IPAO November 2 that Iraqi history was full of persecution against Assyrians. He said that Kurdish and Arab attacks against Assyrians over the past century have repeatedly depopulated Christian villages, forcing many to flee the country.

13. (SBU) Sarkis claimed that Assyrians wanted to return to Northern Iraq, many of whom had fled across the Syrian border. He added that following the fall of Saddam, democracy provided breathing space for Assyrians in the north, while in central and southern Iraq their conditions worsened. For example, since 2003, many Christians have been subject to harassment, persecution, killings, abduction for ransom, and cases of forced conversion, and have fled to Jordan and Syria in addition to northern Iraq.

14. (C) Sarkis accused Kurds, especially those associated with the KDP which controls the Assyrian centers in Dohuk, of continuing to take over Assyrian land. During the three years since 2003, he said, Assyrians are returning to their ancestral villages and want their village lands. Sarkis said Kurds receive priority in law and challenges in court are not resolved in favor of non-Kurds. Sarkis pointed out that in order to regain and retain Assyrian land, the village populations must be strong and stable.

Assyrian rights in northern Iraq

15. (C) Sarkis Aghajan spent 28 years as a leader among Kurds. In those 28 years, he said he never backed down on the 'sacred goals' of national Assyrian rights. He accused Kurds of denying Assyrians rights on their own lands. "The Kurds are not happy with my project, but I will stick to it. Now that the dictator is gone, we have the right to demand our

rights - liberation in Iraq was for all of the components of Iraq, including the Assyrians," Sarkis expounded. He commented that Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shia Arabs have territorial rights and also support from outside Iraq. He indicated that only the Assyrians have no support within Iraq or from neighboring countries, on either the basis of nationality or religion.

¶6. (C) To end the exodus of Christians from Iraq, Sarkis emphasized, he had to take action; if it continued, Christianity would be extinguished in Iraq. He described projects to increase village and town housing, support Assyrian education and community centers, and create a security net for vulnerable families as part of his program to encourage Assyrians to re-establish population centers in the Plains of Nineveh. Sarkis said the increasing Assyrian movement to Iraq's north due to security concerns was enhanced as people heard about his assistance program.

¶7. (C) Sarkis said he deliberately spreads the word of assistance to encourage more Assyrians to boost the Christian population in the focus areas. Sarkis reported he is concentrating on the traditionally Assyrian areas of Ninewah province ("The Plains of Nineveh") and Dohuk. He said he did not encourage displaced or returning Assyrians to go to Erbil because they need to create an Assyrian population concentration and density in Ninewah and Dohuk. "Dohuk and the Plains of Nineveh are historically ours, and we are just returning to our own lands," Sarkis insisted.

Autonomous Homeland in 'The Plains of Nineveh'

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¶8. (SBU) On September 29, 2006, Sarkis made a press statement calling for a national Assyrian homeland in the Plains of Nineveh. He indicated to IPAO that this statement would encourage Assyrians to remain on their lands rather than leaving for Jordan or Syria. He hoped that even Assyrians in the US, Europe, and Australia would find cause to return to an autonomous homeland in Iraq. Following his announcement, he said, he received many offers of international support.

¶9. (C) The districts in Ninewah province of Ain Sifni, Hamdaniya, Tilkef, and also Bashiqa in Mosul district will be the core of an Assyrian autonomous region, Sarkis said. Starting in Ninewah, he explained, they can establish strength and national identity. Assyrian schools and all other 'national' functions should be based in the autonomous region, Sarkis said, to tie other Assyrian areas into a larger homeland. This will enable them to demand "the rest of the Assyrian homeland," which he described as the 'top of the question mark' curving from Ain Kawa and along the northern border of Dohuk.

Nation, rite, or party?

¶10. (C) Sarkis said Assyrian political parties do not represent the people, claiming that in the last elections only 15 percent of Assyrians voted for Assyrian parties while the rest voted for either Arab or Kurdish parties. He claimed that most nominally Assyrian political parties had been established by other groups. The Syriac parties (Syrian Catholic and Syrian Orthodox), he said, had been supported by the PKK in the past. Sarkis alleged that other so-called Christian parties were formed and influenced by the KDP, PUK or Iranians. Sarkis said the ADM (Assyrian Democratic Movement), had occasionally helped Saddam, but this was no worse than others. He reported that the ADM is now linked with the Shia parties. He emphasized that "Those who say Chaldeans or Assyrians or Syriacs are 'separate' are either agents or are weak and trying to gain stature."

Turkey and PKK in Assyrian areas

¶11. (C) Sarkis noted that the PKK has camps in Assyrian mountain areas along the Turkish border with Dohuk. He expressed great concern that a Turkish incursion against the PKK would result in significant damage to Assyrian populations and property. Assyrians could suffer, he said, either as Turkish troops move through or because PKK militants might use the villages as shields. He said many of the villages in this area are newly re-established and rehabilitated.

Family background

¶12. (SBU) Sarkis was born in 1963 (although his ID says 1962, he says) in Diana in Soran district. In 1975 his family moved to Iran where Sarkis finished Prep school (in Tabriz). He was the head of the youth union 1977 to 1979. At that time, he was very religious and planned to be a priest. An American priest Fr. Malloy (as heard) was influential in his life but left for Pakistan in 1979.

¶13. (SBU) In his Tabriz high school, Sarkis established Hizb Democrati Atur (Assyrian Democratic Party, not to be confused with other groups with similar names). He said was among the first to participate in armed struggle against the regime in Iraq. He was secretly leading this Christian party and working with Massoud Barzani. He says he has a 'family relationship' with the Barzanis, as did his father and grandfather, so Massoud and Idris (Nechirvan Barzani's late father, d. 1987) insisted he join them. Sarkis is unmarried and lives alone. He has four sisters and two brothers, living in Japan, Austria, the Netherlands, Canada, and Germany. His father died in 1992 in Iran and his mother lives in the Netherlands.
Khalilzad